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*Some Encounters with the
Culturally Free*

Conor Cruise O'Brien

In 1963, *Encounter* issued a commemorative anthology entitled *Encounters* to mark its tenth year of publication. I reviewed this in the *New Statesman*. My review may be found in my book, *Writers and Politics*. In the review I questioned certain rash assertions made by Sir Denis Brogan in his preface to this anthology, in which he claimed that *Encounter*, 'from its foundation, has been a *journal de combat*, an organ of protest against the *trahison des clercs*'. I pointed out that the political side of *Encounter* was consistently designed to support the policy of the United States Government: 'One of the basic things about *Encounter* is supposed to be its love of liberty; it was love of liberty that brought together, we are told, the people who, in the Congress of Cultural Freedom, sponsored *Encounter*. Love of whose liberty? This is conditioned—as it would be for a communist, but in reverse—by the overall political conflict. Great vigilance is shown about oppression in the communist world; apathy and inconsequence largely prevail where the oppression is non-communist or anti-communist. This generalization needs to be qualified. Silence about oppression has been, if possible, total where the oppressors were believed to be identified with the interests of the United States. Thus the sufferings of Cubans under Batista evoked no comment at the time from the organ of those lovers of liberty, well informed though they undoubtedly are. For Nicaragua, Guatemala, South Vietnam and South Korea the same held good. The Negro problem—that is, the problem of the oppression of Negroes in large areas of the United States today—was consistently played down until quite recently, when the news made it impossible to play it down in the old way.'

At the time I wrote this review, I knew nothing of any connection between the CIA and *Encounter*. This is significant at the present stage, because the present line of defence of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Encounter* is that, though indeed—as they now admit—they

were taking money from the CIA this did not affect their policy which remained entirely independent and exactly what it purported to be. It is interesting therefore that a critic, analysing the *content* of *Encounter*, and not concerned with the sources of its finance, should have reached the conclusion that its policy was to support the American side in the cold war. That is to say, that even if we grant that the policy was independently formed, it was none the less exactly what the CIA must be presumed to have wanted it to be. This happy coincidence could, of course, come about without any pressure whatever on the editor, if the editor responsible for the political side of the magazine had been originally hand-picked by the CIA. Mr Braden has told us that in fact one of the editors of *Encounter* was 'an agent' of the CIA.

On April 27th, 1966, the *New York Times*, in the course of its series of articles on the Central Intelligence Agency, stated that the CIA 'has supported anti-communist but liberal organizations, such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom and some of their newspapers and magazines. *Encounter* magazine was for a long time, though it is not now, one of the indirect beneficiaries of CIA funds.'

There followed a letter, signed by four people, including Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., paying tribute to the 'independence' of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and implying, without explicitly saying so, that it was highly improbable that this paragon of independence could have been supported by the CIA. Mr Schlesinger has subsequently admitted, in the course of a television debate with me on April 30th, that he knew when he was in the Government that the CIA was subsidizing the Congress. The letter which he signed, following the *New York Times* story, was designed to give the contrary impression and to mislead the public. Messrs. Stephen Spender, Irving Kristol and Melvyn Lasky also wrote to the *New York Times* declaring that they had no knowledge of any indirect benefactions. Mr Lasky has recently been quoted as admitting that he knew of these benefactions in 1963. It follows that in signing this letter he, like Mr Schlesinger, was seeking to mislead the public.

The *New York Times* did not withdraw its original statement, but said that it had implied no reflection on the independence, etc, of those concerned.

In my Homer Wart lecture to the alumni of New York University on May 19th, 1966, on the subject of *The Writer and the Power Structure*, I mentioned the *New York Times* revelations and made some further comments on *Encounter*, including the following: 'In a skilfully-executed politico-cultural operation of the *Encounter* type, the writing specifically required by the power structure was done by people who, as writers, were of the third or fourth rank but who were, as the Belgians used to say about Moise Tshombe, *compréhensifs*, that is, they could take a hint. But the beauty of the operation, in every sense, was that writers of the first rank, who had no interest at all in serving the power structure, were induced to do so unwittingly. Over the years the magazine, shrewdly edited, adequately financed and efficiently distributed, attracted many writers who hardly noticed, or did not think it

important, that this forum was not quite an open forum, that its political accoustics were a little odd, that the sonorities at the eastern end were of a quite different character from the western ones. Thus writers of high achievement and complete integrity were led unconsciously to validate, through their collaboration, the more purposeful activities of lesser writers who in turn were engaged in a sustained and consistent political activity in the interests—and as it now appears at the expense—of the power structure in Washington.'

Excerpts from this lecture, including the passages about *Encounter*, were published in *Book Week*, copies of which were distributed to the delegates to the PEN Congress in July. In this way delegates from countries where the *New York Times* does not normally circulate, were made aware for the first time of what the *New York Times* said.

In the following month, *Encounter* published in their *Column* section signed 'R', an attack on my character and writing. This was linked to quotations from my Homer Watt lecture and the article sought to convey the impression that the charge that *Encounter* had been indirectly financed by the CIA was so ludicrous as only to be understandable as an obsessive delusion of a much-flawed personality. The article stated, quite falsely, that I had described my own activities in Katanga as those of 'a Machiavelli of peace'. From his mis-statement about what I was alleged to have said, the writer then made some rapid deductions about my character, concluding that I regarded myself as theoretically licensed to engage in all forms of mendacity, duplicity, betrayal and bad faith. By a notable exercise in Freudian projection, he also charged me with being 'a politico-cultural Joe McCarthy'.

The *New Statesman* offered me space to reply to this attack and I submitted my draft reply to them. At this stage one of the editors of *Encounter* telephoned the *New Statesman* to say that if they published a reply by me and if that reply contained (as in fact it did) a quotation of the *New York Times* statement about *Encounter* and the CIA, then *Encounter* would sue the *New Statesman*. The *New Statesman* therefore, quite naturally, hesitated about publishing my reply. I then consulted my own lawyers in Dublin, who advised me that the *Encounter* article itself was in fact 'very libellous'. It was open to me to sue either in Dublin—where I had a residence—or in England. I had some reason to fear that members of a British jury might be prejudiced against me. I therefore proceeded in Dublin.

The first step in the proceedings was a demand on my part, through my lawyers, for an apology for the libel they had published. In refusing this apology, *Encounter's* lawyers—invoking the defence of 'qualified privilege'—stated that I had given currency to the 'false assertion' made about them in the *New York Times*—i.e. the statement that they had been in receipt of indirect benefactions by the CIA. The lawyers must be presumed to have acted on the instruction of their clients. According to his own subsequent admission, one of the principals, Melvyn Lasky, already knew that the assertion which his lawyers stigmatized as false was completely true.

The case was set for hearing in Dublin in February 1967. As this date

came nearer, *Encounter* began to make the first tentative overtures for a settlement. In refusing any settlement not based on a full apology by them, I indicated that I could not possibly back down even if I wished to—which I did not—without appearing to confirm that I had reason to fear an appearance in court. They then offered, instead of a straight apology, a kind of joint statement in which I would say that I intended no aspersions on their integrity and they would say that they intended none on mine. I refused this.

At this stage they entered no defence in Dublin, letting it be known that they did not regard themselves as bound to defend outside Great Britain. Judgment was accordingly awarded against them by default in the High Court in Dublin on February 14th and a hearing before a jury to determine the amount of damages was set for May 3rd. At this stage it looked as though, while heavy damages would probably be awarded in my favour, there would be no way either of collecting these or my own costs as *Encounter* had little or no assets within the jurisdiction and—for reasons indicated above—it would be hazardous to pursue them in England. However, by a timely stroke of fortune, it was during this period that—following the disclosures in *Ramparts* magazine—the whole ramifications of the CIA politico-cultural operation involving the Congress for Cultural Freedom and *Encounter* surfaced in the United States press so thoroughly that denials were no longer possible. In these circumstances, and as far as their original adumbrated defence had been based on stigmatizing as a 'false assertion' something that was now known to be true, I felt that it would no longer be hazardous for me to proceed against them if necessary in Britain. Accordingly I informed people whom I knew to be in touch with them that if they did not honour whatever award a Dublin jury would make in my favour, I would immediately institute proceedings against them in Britain. At this point they briefed counsel in Dublin and on May 3rd their counsel read out the following statement in the High Court:

'An article was published in the August issue of *Encounter* concerning the standards which Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien employs as a writer and a critic and his actions as an official of the United Nations in the Congo. We acknowledge that this article contained imputations against the character and integrity of Dr O'Brien which were unwarranted and we wish unreservedly to withdraw them and to apologize to Dr O'Brien for having made them. We further acknowledge that Dr O'Brien, as a writer and critic and whilst serving the United Nations, has always maintained the highest standards of personal integrity and we regret that the article we published should have made charges against his integrity which were without justification.

The joint editors have agreed to publish their apology in the next issue of *Encounter* and have agreed to indemnify Dr O'Brien in respect of his costs and expenses in relation to these proceedings and to pay an appropriate sum to a charity to be nominated by him.'

Subsequent events, including the resignations of Messrs Spender and Kermode—who had not been privy to the CIA connection—and the retention in office of Melvyn J. Lasky, who had been privy to it—are well known.

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THE PERISCOPE

CIA, Subsidies and Americans Abroad

The blue-ribbon committee created by LBJ last spring following the CIA subsidy revelations will report to the President this fall on new methods of financing the overseas activities of private U.S. groups such as the National Student Association. The committee has reached general agreement on the need for Congress to establish a government-supported, independent citizens' council to supply money where needed to student, labor and cultural groups abroad. But it hasn't been able to agree on the scope of the mandate that should be given the proposed council. Some committee members, mainly educators, want the council to take on full responsibility, including selection and operation of all cultural exchanges, Fulbright scholarships and similar government programs. Administration officials on the committee argue that for now at least it will have all it can do administering subsidies.